

The Return by **DrSuesss**

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Summary: Moving on from the nightmarish events of recent years has been a difficult process for everyone. Just as there appears to be hope on the horizon, a darkness looms, awaiting an opportunity to infect the small town once again. Takes place one year after the gate was closed. My vision for Season 3.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note: Well, here goes nothing. I finally decided to write a fanfiction because I love this show so much, and I've been obsessed with it ever since I first watched it a year ago. I'm certainly not an experienced writer, as this is my first fanfic. But I had some good ideas for Season 3, and was eager to create my own adventure for these characters I love so much. Plus it gives me something to do while I wait! I'd love to know what you guys think, so a review would be awesome! Thanks :)

Eight... Thirty, El thought to herself as she read the small glowing numbers on the top of her dresser. Her dad was late, once again. While she was well aware that her adoptive father wasn't a punctual man in the slightest, she could never seem to shake the twinge of disappointment she would always feel around this time when she still hadn't heard their secret knock. She knew that her dad would come back eventually, she just never knew exactly when, and the uncertainty made her uncomfortable. El didn't like being alone. Her entire life, save for a few precious days in the last couple of years, she had been stuck in isolation.

The girl turned her gaze toward the calendar hanging on the wall next to her bed. It had been a Christmas gift from her dad. Each day she marked another box with a colorful 'X' using her Crayola markers from Joyce Byers (also a Christmas gift). Her dad had promised that she would be allowed to leave the cabin before the calendar ran out of days.

"November," she whispered.

El picked up the purple marker and added another 'X' over her favorite number. "Eleven."

She sighed as she rolled back over in her bed and stared at the ceiling. There were only fifty boxes left on the calendar. She had crossed out 315 of them already. That number reminded her of something.

"Three... one... five," she mouthed silently as a fond memory came back to her. Three-fifteen had been the time that Mike had asked her to meet him under the power lines, back when Will was lost. And that's exactly when he had come to meet her. Mike hadn't been late. He had kept his promise. El still wore the very same watch that she had used that day. Mike had given it back to her at the Snowball. She raised it up to her eyes to check the time again. Only five minutes had gone by since she had last checked. She groaned as her hand dropped back down onto the mattress, bouncing slightly on the soft surface. Would her dad keep his promise? She could never tell.

"Turn around, turn around!" Yelled Max.

"Shut up, I'm not blind!" Dustin shouted back. "Wait. No! NO!" His hands shot up to clutch the sides of his head and he stepped back from the screen, refusing to watch as a rock fell on top of his character, ending his turn on the Dig Dug cabinet.

"You sure about that Dustin?" Said Lucas, smirking.

"Oh shut up, Lucas, it's not like *you* can beat Max's high score."

"That's okay. She's the best player out of all of us. She deserves the top spot! Besides, she's teaching me her strategies, and someday, that high score will be *mine*!"

"Oh, give me a break!" Dustin scoffed. "What, so is she like the master now and you're the apprentice? Do you two have some *evil plan to rule the Palace Arcade*?" He held his hands up in a mocking manner.

"Hey, I just told you my strategies too, Dustin," said Max, shrugging. "I guess Lucas is just a faster learner."

"Oh, surrrre." said Dustin. "Even though *I'm* the one who had the high score before you came, Max."

"Let's leave the past in the past," said Lucas.

"Hey, at least you still have Centipede," Will spoke up.

"I guess," Dustin rolled his eyes. "But Mike's been threatening that

score too lately."

"Where is Mike, anyway?" Said Max.

"I don't know, probably sitting in his basement talking to Eleven again," Replied Dustin. "He told me he had to watch his baby sister or something. Probably just an excuse. I know he misses her and everything, but so do we. And doesn't Hopper let him visit her sometimes?"

"Yeah, I think so," said Will. "Plus they have that weird... mind connection thing."

Max looked back and forth between the boys suspiciously. She always felt like the odd one out when they talked about Eleven, even though they had explained everything to her the best that they could. She had seen some weird shit last year, certainly beyond anything she had ever previously believed possible. But there was still so much mystery for her revolving around this other friend of theirs, and if she was honest with herself, she didn't really like it. During their one and only interaction, Eleven had ignored her; given the cold shoulder toward her offer of friendship. Max had tried not to be bitter about it, but it was hard for her to feel otherwise when her only experience of Eleven was one of being ignored and brushed aside.

"I'm sure Mike will be back to normal once Eleven can come out of hiding," said Lucas. "The Chief said it would be before the end of the year, right?"

"Yeah, I think so," said Will. "Hopefully before Christmas."

"Hey, maybe *Eleven* will come and steal your Dig Dug crown, Max!" Dustin smirked.

Max rolled her eyes. "Well, she can flip vans and make people fly with her mind powers, so... why not?" she said sarcastically. She was mostly joking, but a small, jealous part of her was worried about the thought of Eleven coming back.

"Mikey Mikey Mikey! Try to get me!" Mike Wheeler's 5-year-old sister

Holly was jumping on the couch, chanting.

"Holly, come on! It's past your bedtime. Mom and Dad are gonna be mad if you aren't in bed when they get home!" Mike flopped down in his Dad's Lay-Z-Boy and clutched his aching head. His annoying younger sister had already knocked over a lamp, which thankfully hadn't broken, but now he was watching her leap between the furniture like the floor was lava or something. The living room was cluttered with dolls, picture books, and miscellaneous papers that his family had made the mistake of leaving out. Mike groaned as he thought of his friends at the arcade. How had he gotten stuck with watching Holly? His parents must have thought that he would automatically become a babysitter just because he was in high school, now. He had about 20 minutes before his parents would be back at 9 o'clock, and they would kill him if his sister was still up.

"Not going to bed unless you catch me, Mikey!" Holly giggled. An hour earlier, the girl had convinced her older brother, through relentless whining, to allow her a second bowl of ice cream. Mike would have never given in if he had been given any hint to the intensity of the resulting sugar rush.

"Holly, really. You need to get to bed," Mike pleaded. His attempts, however, remained futile.

"Nuh uh!" Holly shook her head as she continued to use the couch as a trampoline.

Where the hell is Nancy? Mike wondered. Nancy always seemed to get her way when babysitting their youngest sibling. Maybe it was because she was older. Maybe it was because she was a girl. Probably both. Lately, however, she had been spending so much time with Jonathan Byers that Mike hardly ever knew where she was. Not that he cared. It's just that at this particular moment, he could really use her assistance. Suddenly, the sound of car tires on the driveway brought him to high alert. Of *course* his parents would be coming home early. As if things couldn't get any worse.

"Holly *come on!*" He begged. "Mom and Dad are home and they told me if you're not in bed, you wouldn't get any more dessert for a week!" The part about the dessert was a lie, as it was more likely that

he would be the one to be punished. Still, after seeing how the sugar had affected her, he didn't think it was a bad idea at all. His tale was enough to fool his gullible sister, who, at the thought of missing out on a week's worth of ice cream, leaped off of the couch and bolted towards the stairs and up to her room.

Just as Holly was out of sight, Mike heard the click of the lock and the turn of the doorknob. He could apologize for the trashed living room and clean it up without much of a problem. He just hoped that Holly had actually put herself to bed and didn't just run upstairs to make another mess.

"Sorry about the living room, Mom, I'll clean it up. Holly is in bed," Mike said quickly as the front door opened.

"Mike? Where's Mom and Dad?"

"Huh?" Mike turned towards the door to see his older sister Nancy entering the house.

"Wait..." said Nancy. "Mom made you watch Holly? Jesus. No wonder our house looks like the Byers' did last year."

"Where were you?" Asked Mike, annoyed. "Of *course* I had to watch Holly. Mom and Dad went on their stupid date and I couldn't go to the arcade because you weren't around to babysit her!"

"Jeez, Mike. Other people have lives too, you know. I can help you clean up the living room, how about that?"

"Another date with Jonathan again?" Mike grumbled as Nancy set down her purse and began to pick toys off of the living room floor.

"And... what's wrong with that?" Nancy responded.

"Nothing, I guess..." Mike said quietly. He still found it slightly weird that his sister was dating one of his best friend's older brothers. The two of them continued to work without exchanging words for a few minutes.

"How's Eleven doing?" Nancy asked, breaking the silence.

Mike sighed heavily as he tossed a stack of papers onto a small table next to the couch. "I don't know... Lonely... But she's doing fine I guess. I just don't understand why the chief thinks he needs to hide her for *two damn years*," His volume began to rise as he thought about El, probably sitting in her room staring at the wall because there was nothing else to do. He had seen her cabin, stranded in the middle of the forest, the middle of nowhere. Hopper had been taking him to visit once a month, but it wasn't nearly enough. Not even close.

"Well... at least she's-

"What?" Mike cut in, interrupting his sister. "At least she's *safe*? Don't even start with that! There's a difference between keeping someone safe, and completely isolating them from everything they care about. He's *torturing* her, Nancy!" Mike was nearly shouting at this point.

Nancy, caught off guard by her brother's sudden outburst, simply nodded her head. "I'm sorry," she started. "Isn't the plan for her to be back next month, though? So it's almost over, then."

"It *better* be," replied Mike.

The backroads of Hawkins, Indiana were as silent as ever on another crisp November night. A mild breeze induced a gentle swaying of the tree branches, but it wasn't quite enough to shake the few remaining leaves still clutching them. Tiny ripples rolled across the small puddles that had yet to dry up from the previous night's rainfall. The tranquility of the evening was such that one could perceive even the tiptoeing of the smallest mouse across the dried twigs along the roadside. The only sound, besides the soft hooting of an owl, was the distant roar of an engine. It was almost inaudible at first, but as the seconds went by, it became more and more difficult to ignore as the source of the unnatural noise seemed to be approaching quickly.

Suddenly, the night's calmness was completely interrupted by the screeching of tires as a blinding light flooded the sleeping forest. Leaves were stirred into the air and the tree branches now rattled violently, yet their sound was buried by the deafening exhaust note. The source of the light, two circular beams hovering close to the ground, was gone just as quickly as it had arrived. The forest,

however, remained lit. A second, slightly higher pair of rectangular headlights, along with a blinding flash of red and blue, followed in close pursuit. The second vehicle's blaring siren was nearly as noisy as the roaring engine of the first.

"There's a fork coming up in about a quarter mile. You're gonna need more distance if you wanna shake em' off."

"I *got this*, Tommy, trust me. You think I've never done this before?" Billy Hargrove pressed the accelerator to the floor as the Camaro's engine screamed.

Tommy said nothing in reply, but plucked the cigarette from his lips and exhaled into the car's already smoggy interior.

Billy glanced at the speedometer. The needle was just passing the 70 mile-per-hour mark and was climbing steadily. He looked into his rearview mirror. The blue lights were gradually falling further away. He gripped the steering wheel tightly as he guided the vehicle through the slight bends in the forest road. In the distance, he saw where the road split into two separate avenues. He let off of the accelerator slightly, allowing his pursuer to gain some ground on him.

"What are you doing?" Yelled Tommy.

"I *said* that I *got this*", Billy repeated, his voice aggravated.

The sounds of the siren got louder as the police vehicle inched closer. The Camaro slowly glided toward the right side of the road as the fork approached, and the cop did the same.

"Alright, you bastard..." Billy said under his breath.

Tommy clutched his armrest tightly. The cop was right on their tail now, and the fork was directly in front of them. Suddenly, his head nearly smashed through the window as the car jerked violently to the left. The screeching of rubber tires braking on the old pavement was deafening, and he worried that he might suffer a broken neck from the sudden jolt as the car swerved into the opposite lane and nearly flipped over.

Billy looked unfazed, save for a slight, smug smile creeping onto his lips. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the braking tail lights of the police truck, which hadn't reacted fast enough and had taken the other path. Billy quickly flipped his own lights off, concealing his blue car amongst the darkness. He completed his turnaround and carefully crept his vehicle off of the side of the road and into a ditch. Pulling the keys and shutting off his car, he looked into his mirror once more to see the cop, sitting still in the road with his siren on.

"*God Damn it...*" Jim Hopper sighed as he picked his hat off of the floor between the seats. It had fallen off his head at some bump during that ridiculous chase. He looked in his rearview mirror. The car he had been chasing was nowhere to be found. Hopper couldn't remember the last time he had broken 70 miles per hour in his Blazer. Certainly never in the quiet Hawkins backroads. Hopper didn't often do street patrol, but he was used to speeders pulling over when he turned his lights on. He had only been involved in a chase once before, and it had been back when he was an officer in New York. He hadn't been prepared for this one, to say the least.

Hopper looked at the clock on his dashboard. It was already 9 PM. *Shit!*, he thought. He had been trying to be better about being home on time for his adopted daughter. He felt that he had been doing good lately, up until now. He groaned. He knew he wasn't the most reliable man, but this was disappointing even for him. He checked his mirror one last time to see if that Camaro had somehow reappeared. Still nothing. He shook his head and turned off the siren on his truck. He was late to get home, *and* he had let a reckless driver off the hook? Today was not his best day.

Hopper turned his truck around and began to head back in the direction of his secluded forest cabin. As much as he tried to make it appear that it didn't matter, Hopper genuinely hated coming home late, and he felt like a terrible father. He knew that it must already be hard on El, being forced to stay in the cabin for such an agonizingly long stretch of time. The least he could do for her was come home to eat dinner with her and ask her how her day went; maybe teach her a short lesson or just relax and watch some TV. But tonight, he had failed. He had been planning to make it home on time, but Flo had

called him to a burglary scene last-minute. On his way back to the station, that blue Camaro had blown right past him, and from there it was an all-out game of chase, which he had ultimately lost. Thankfully nobody had been injured, otherwise his tardiness would have been unforgivable. Still, he would have to find a way to make it up to El. He hoped that she would still trust him.

"It should be ready now, sir,"

"Very well, Richard. You can leave now, if you'd like," A cold voice replied.

"Thank you, Dr. Brenner," said Richard. "I know that you won't be disappointed with the results."

"I'm sure I won't," Brenner said, holding out a wrinkled hand.

Richard reached into the pocket of his white lab coat and withdrew a small vile. "It's fast acting, as you know," he instructed. "We haven't tested this new formula yet, but if our calculations are correct, the effects should be permanent."

"Fascinating," Brenner replied. "You've done good work, son. You can expect your payment very, very soon."

"Thank you sir," The younger man said.

"I'll see you tomorrow. Hopefully we will have good news to look forward to."

"Certainly, sir," Richard replied.

After hearing the door click shut, Dr. Brenner turned and opened a small metal drawer in his desk. He had been waiting nearly a year for this moment. He and his crew had tested countless formulas since he had regrouped 14 months ago, but he had a feeling that on this night he might finally take another stride toward the goal he had been working so hard for. The old man pulled a syringe from the drawer and removed the top before carefully inserting the vile he had received from his assistant. He then twisted a needle on the end, screwing it into place. Brenner looked up from his desk at the closet

door in front of him. Needle in hand, he began to approach it slowly, the tapping of his shoes echoing throughout the dimly lit room. After pulling a key from his pocket and unlocking the closet, he pulled open the heavy metal door and flipped the light switch.

Sitting in the middle of the supply room was a bed, on which a man who appeared to be in his forties was strapped down. The man was frail and sickly in appearance. His hair was long and disheveled, and his face was covered by a scraggly, unkempt beard. He wore nothing but a white hospital gown. The man stared up at Dr. Brenner with hatred as he stopped and stood by his side. However, he could say nothing through the saliva-soaked gag in his mouth.

"Look at me," whispered Brenner. "Look me in the eyes."

The man shut his eyes tightly.

Brenner shook his head, gently toying with the syringe in his hands. "Suit yourself," he said. "If what I've been told is true, you'll look at me soon enough."

The old man knelt down on one knee as he observed the thin arm before him, tightly bound to the table by its wrist. The man on the table shuddered at the touch of Brenner's icy fingers as he felt for a vein.

"You'll want to hold still for this," Brenner spoke coldly. The man shook his head violently, groaning loudly through his fabric restraint as Brenner touched the tip of the needle to his skin. The unfazed Dr. Brenner pressed forward, plunging the needle deep into his arm. The man jolted, but after a few moments calmed down as Brenner pushed the last of the clear substance into his bloodstream.

The scientist looked back toward the man's face as he removed the needle. He was lying motionless, staring straight up at the ceiling with wide eyes. Dr. Brenner stood and grabbed a pen and clipboard from their hanging place on the wall. If everything that Richard had told him was indeed true, the next phase of his plan had to begin immediately.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Knock knock... knock... knock knock knock. Hopper's fist continued to hover in front of the cabin door after tapping out the morse code password, just in case he would have to hit the door a few more times. He wasn't anticipating the locks to click open on his first attempt. His daughter was rather stubborn when frustrated with him, and tonight it would be safe to assume that was the case. Just as he was about to knock again, he heard the sliding of the latches on the other side of the door.

Hopper gently pushed the door open and stepped inside. He had been working hard on his parenting skills over the past year. They had gotten awfully rusty after his first family had tragically fallen apart, followed by just about every other aspect of his life. However, he felt that the pieces might finally be starting to come back together for him. Despite everything he had dealt with in recent years, he was starting to glimpse a light at the end of the tunnel. He just hoped his eyes weren't fooling him this time. If they weren't; if he was reading the signs right, then it was quite possible that El (Or Jane, as she would come to be known as) could be *officially* introduced to the world very, very soon. He had been withholding his plans from the girl as to not break her heart in case things didn't turn out. But if everything went as he hoped, she could be out before the week was. While he was carefully optimistic about the future for both him and his newly adopted little girl, he still had to deal with the task at hand. He had made a mistake, and he needed to fix it.

Hopper approached the girl's closed bedroom door, looking at the colorful sign that she had created the previous winter. The sign, which was taped crookedly on the blue wooden door, displayed the name 'Jane' in sloppy, red and purple handwriting. Blue butterflies were sketched around the lettering, and snowman stickers were placed sporadically around the border of the thin, grainy paper. The art skills resembled those of a kidnergardener, but the drawing never failed to warm the chief's heart, despite his hardened demeanor. Hopper lifted his hand above the small sign and gently tapped on the

door with the back of his knuckle.

"El?" He quietly called. No response.

"Look... Some stuff came up late at work today... I'm, uh... I'm sorry. Sorry I wasn't able to signal you, kid. Can you let me in? I can read you another chapter of *Alice in Wonderland*, if you want." Hopper waited, but the other side of the door still offered nothing but silence. *Maybe she's asleep*, he thought. She didn't normally go to bed before ten. Suddenly he heard the unlocking of the door from the other side. He quietly turned the knob and pushed. The door creaked noisily as it slowly opened. Leaning inside, he found the room dimly lit, with only the small lamp in the corner illuminating the motionless lump underneath the blankets. Hopper thumped over to the nightstand and picked up the book before taking a seat at the side of the bed.

"You doing okay, kid?" There was a gentleness in his deep voice.

The bulge in the sheets shifted slightly.

"I, ah, I'm sorry I'm late again. This won't become a regular thing again, I promise," Hopper said.

"When can I come out?" A small voice snuck out from under the covers.

"Come out...?" Hopper said, sounding confused. "Out of the blankets? You can come out whenever you want. I'd like to see you..."

"No. Out... Where people are. Where friends are."

"Oh, *out* out," Hopper rubbed his eyes. Of *course* that's what she meant. He was too tired to think straight.

"Look, kid... I know it's hard being here alone all the time. But you need to believe me when I say it, this really is almost over. I'm not going to break my promise. You hear?"

A soft whimper came from the sheets.

Hopper thought about telling her right then and there that he was planning on letting her visit her friends sometime that week; that the

talk in the town regarding government conspiracies had cooled off, and that he had come up with an elaborate story to explain their adoptive relationship. He stared at the book in his hands as he debated with himself. He had been holding off on telling her for weeks, planning to surprise her on the day of. But why, exactly? As cautious as he was, he had to admit there weren't any signs that anyone out there would still be after her. After all, the lab that had once held her captive had been shut down, left to rot behind a barbed wire fence. And as far as he knew (and he knew a lot after scouring every source he could possibly find), that psychotic scumbag, Dr. Brenner, was dead. He lifted his gaze back up to the covers where his daughter was hiding. He couldn't keep her in the dark anymore. Besides, he owed her something after coming home late.

"El... There's uh, there's something I've been meaning to tell you for awhile, now." Hopper scooted his chair slightly closer to the bed. "You listening to me, El?"

The top of the lump shifted back and forth, which Hopper took as a nod.

"Kid, could you come out from there and get some air? I don't want to keep talking to a pile of blankets." He instructed.

El pulled the blankets down just far enough for her eyes and nose to poke out. Freed from her hot, stuffy cave, she took a deep breath of the cool, fresh air. She turned her head slightly towards Hopper, who noticed her tear-stained eyes.

"So, I've been considering how safe it might be for you to spend some time outside the cabin, maybe visit your friends," Hopper started.

Instantly, El's eyes widened. She pulled the blanket down to reveal the rest of her face as she stared at her father with anticipation.

"Now listen, El. Before I let you out into the world there's a lot of things we need to talk about and go over, alright?"

El nodded vigorously, her excitement clearly building as her arms found their way out to wipe her eyes.

"Now what I'm about to say isn't a *promise*, alright? It's not a *promise*, but if all goes well and I'm not too busy... Maybe we can get you together with your pals this Wednesday."

El immediately leaped from the bed and looked at the calendar on her wall. "Wednesday." She frantically found the weekday and traced it down three rows with her finger, to the first Wednesday that she hadn't placed an 'X' over. "Wednesday, thirteen?" She turned back to Hopper, her finger still shakily hovering over the date on the calendar.

Hopper hadn't seen his daughter this excited since he had let Mike stop in last Christmas Eve. Her eyes, which she had wiped moments earlier, were once again soaked as she stared at him in blissful shock. "That's right, kid," said Hopper. "November 13th."

Hopper nearly fell off his chair as he was immediately wrapped in the girl's arms, holding him as tightly as she could. The man put his own arms around his daughter, hugging her into a warm, fatherly embrace as she leaned her head on his shoulder, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks. Hopper closed his eyes, rubbing El's shoulder comfortingly.

"*Thank you*," was all that El could manage to squeak out in her shaky, choked up voice.

The two of them stayed there for several minutes, locked in each other's arms. El's wait was finally over, and for Hopper, the light at the end of the tunnel was blinding.

"Bye, guys!" Will waved at his friends before opening the door of his brother's car.

"Catch you later!" Dustin called back while Lucas waved from his bike and Max set her skateboard on the pavement.

"How's it going, bud?" Jonathan greeted his younger brother as he climbed into the passenger's seat.

"It was good. I *almost* beat Lucas's high score on Ms. Pacman. He's

held it for almost a year! Not even Max can beat it. I think he just got lucky."

"Sounds pretty competitive!" Jonathan grinned.

"What did you do tonight?" Will said, watching his friends as the car drove past them. The three of them waved again, and Will waved back.

"Well, Nancy and I grabbed some dinner. Then we we checked out that new bowling place that just opened up."

"Bowling?" Will chuckled. "Since when do you bowl?"

"I know, I know. But Nancy convinced me to try something new. And you know, it was actually pretty fun!" Jonathan paused. "Well, when I wasn't throwing the ball into the gutters, that is."

Will shrugged. "Yeah, I guess..." He knew that it was only normal for his older brother to have a girlfriend. Jonathan was still hanging out with him often, but it still felt weird hearing about this other aspect of his brother's life that he wasn't a part of. Especially since they had always been so close, sharing everything with one another. Nancy was okay, he supposed. At least it was someone that he knew. He could always talk to Mike about it, seeing as they were in the same boat, just on opposite ends. Then again, with El coming back soon, who knew what would become of his other best friend.

A few minutes later, the two of them reached their home. Jonathan's car rolled to a stop next to their mother's Pinto, and the brothers exited the car and began heading towards the house. Just as they were stepping onto the porch, the door was opened for them.

"Hey, guys!" Joyce greeted them with a tired smile. She still wore her work uniform, having arrived home just minutes earlier.

"Hey Mom," They said in unison, each giving their mother a quick, one-armed hug as they came through the door.

"Did you have fun at the arcade?" Joyce questioned her younger son.

"Yeah, it was fun! Thanks for letting me go," said Will.

"Oh, no problem, honey!" His mother smiled nervously. Joyce was always hesitant to let her son go out, even if he was with friends. Her protectiveness was understandable when considering that in the past two years alone, her son had not only been kidnapped and dragged into another plane of existence, but possessed by an evil, unknown entity from the aforementioned alternate dimension. It was quite the miracle that she still had him after all that had happened, and she couldn't help but try to hold on as tightly as she could.

Will, on the other hand, was trying his best to forget about the horrors that had plagued him in recent years, as difficult as it was. He didn't recall very much from the time when he had been possessed by the Mind Flayer. After all, the interdimensional hivemind had overtaken most of his brain, resulting in any memories made at the time to leave him as the Mind Flayer had. The beginning of last November, in Will's mind, was just bits and pieces of random, blurry information. Even so, Will still frequently had nightmares of the cold, desolate place they called the Upside Down. Though this time, he was certain they were nothing more than just bad dreams.

"What about you, Jonathan? How was your... date with Miss Wheeler? Joyce tilted her head and narrowed her eyes at him, playfully.

"Uh, it... it was great..." Jonathan said, his face reddening. He still felt awkward talking to his mom about his relationship with Nancy, and her goofy antics didn't help.

"How was work?" He asked, trying to change the subject.

"Oh, you know. Tiring." Joyce shrugged.

Jonathan nodded sympathetically. His mother had worked for Melvald's General Store for almost 12 years. He did his best to help her, whether that be working extra hours himself, or helping around the house. He knew how difficult it was for her, trying to support the family with the small paychecks she earned as a retail clerk. She was always stressed or anxious, and recent events hadn't made it any easier. It wasn't just what Will had gone through, either. Ever since Bob's tragic passing, she had been slightly distant and withdrawn. It didn't have a huge affect on her productivity; it was more of a

constant, subtle yet noticeable sadness in her eyes.

"I think I'm gonna go to bed now, boys," said Joyce, yawning.

"All right, Mom. Goodnight," said Will.

"Have a good night."

Both sons gave her one more hug before she retreated to her room, still wearing her work vest.

"I don't want you to tell anyone about this yet, you hear? Let's keep this between you and me. It's just one more day." Hopper's words echoed in El's head as she tossed and turned in her bed. She looked at the clock again. *One, three, seven.* She knew that if she stayed up all night, Wednesday would take longer. But how could she fall asleep? Her mind was too excited; too eager for that day to even consider settling down to rest. Whenever she would close her eyes, she would begin to think about her friends again. Dustin, Lucas, Will... And Mike. Her heart fluttered in her chest as she smiled at the idea of being able to see her *favorite* friend again. Even with his monthly visits, she still missed him the most, and it wasn't even close.

El rolled over in her bed again to face the calendar. She had circled the '13' box in every color of marker she could find. This was too much for her. The anticipation was unbearable. She had to see him again. Now. She *needed* to.

El climbed out of her bed and quietly crept through the dark bedroom, towards her door. Carefully turning the knob, she pushed it open as slowly as she could. Suddenly, a loud creak brought her progress to an abrupt stop. She knew this door well. If it opened any further, she would risk waking her father. Luckily, she was just small enough to fit through the narrow crack she had made. Pressing her back to the wall and standing on her tiptoes, she slipped through the doorway and into the living room.

After a snore from her dad confirmed that he was sleeping, she carefully padded into the kitchen. With her father sleeping on the couch, she obviously couldn't use the TV to aid her telepathic

connection, so the radio would have to do. El carefully lifted the black box off of the countertop and began to silently make her way back into her bedroom.

Once she had safely slipped back through the door, she set the radio on her nightstand. After plugging it in and turning the dials until it put out a quiet static, she grabbed her blindfold. *Won't tell him*, she told herself as she tied the strip of cloth around her face. *Just visiting him*.

El focused hard. She pictured Mike as she allowed the quiet, crackling hum of the radio to flood her mind, drowning any and all competing sensory input, until she no longer felt the bed she was sitting on, or the chilling floorboards underneath her feet, or the cool night air seeping in through the cabin's wooden walls. It wasn't until she felt nothing at all, as if floating in an infinite void, that she opened her eyes. And there he was.

In the midst of the blackness, Mike's bed stood alone, soft ripples emanating from each of its four legs. As El approached it, she noticed that Mike seemed disturbed and uneasy, his eyes clenched tightly shut. Suddenly, the boy's eyes opened as she reached his bedside. El drew back, slightly startled as she wasn't expecting him to still be awake. Glancing down, she noticed his walkie talkie lying on the floor. Her heart began to pound. Would she have an opportunity to talk to Mike? As she reached for the device, her dad's words played in her mind again, echoing through the darkness. *Let's keep this between you and me. It's just one more day*.

El looked back up at her troubled friend. *He needs me*. She reached down and rested her fingers on the handheld radio.

"Mike?"

The boy's eyelids, which had been shut again, shot open instantly. He leaned over the side of his bed and snatched the walkie talkie off of the floor.

"El?" His voice had come out louder than he had expected, causing a high-pitched crack. He clasped his hand over his mouth as he looked around, red embarrassment flooding his cheeks. "S-sorry. Uh, how's it

going, El?"

"Good!" El smiled at Mike, forgetting that he couldn't see her. El wanted desperately to tell him what her father had told her. She wanted to tell him everything; tell him what she was looking forward to, and plan what they would do when they would see each other again. She sat in silence for a moment, using her dad's instructions to fight back the urge.

"Did anything cool happen today?" Mike asked, lying back in his bed with his walkie talkie.

"Wednesday, thirteen," The words leaped from her mouth as she lost her grip on them. Now it was El whose hand was clasped over her mouth.

"...What?" Mike asked, confused.

El could hardly believe herself. Had she even lasted a minute? She sighed as she looked back up at the boy sitting on his bed. Seeing his perplexed expression, she decided that it was only right for her to explain. *It's okay*, she thought. *Mike won't tell*. She remembered one of the first things that Mike had ever taught her, back when she was still living in the blanket fort that he had made for her. *Friends tell each other things*, he had said. *Things that parents don't know*.

"Dad said I can come visit," said El. "On Wednesday, thirteen."

"Wait, WHAT?!" Mike's voice cracked again, but he didn't notice this time.

El grinned widely as she watched Mike's reaction. She could still hardly believe it herself, and seeing his excitement made her want to press her lips against his, like they had done at the Snowball, and at the school that one night, and on Christmas Eve when her dad wasn't looking. She stood up, wishing desperately that her abilities allowed her to overcome the physical barrier between them. She knew that if she tried to touch him, her efforts would just pass through him, and she might lose her connection. So she painstakingly fought back the urge, having to settle for just watching and listening.

"El!" Mike nearly shouted for joy, but he, too, had to hold back, as his mom would kill him if she found him awake at this hour on a school night. "El, wow. That's amazing!"

El nodded, her eyes once again flooded with happy tears. "I know!" She chirped, remembering that Mike couldn't see her. Then she recalled what her dad had told her. "Don't tell anyone," she said. "Not even friends."

"I won't, El." Mike shook his head. "This is between you and me."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Thanks so much to everyone who followed chapter 1, and especially to those that gave a review! I'm hoping to be able to update this consistently. However, the new semester starts this week for me, so I'm not sure how often I'll be able to write, but I'll try my best! Make sure to keep letting me know how I'm doing; I'm still new to this fanfiction thing :P See you in the next one!

3. Chapter 3

Sorry for the delay on this chapter! I'm back in school now so it's gonna be harder to work on this consistently but I'll do my best :) Thanks so much to everyone still reading!

"So that's... twelve boxes of the Scrubbles Original and... Eight of the citrus scented?" Steve Harrington mumbled into the phone, running his fingers through his hair as his head sagged over his desk. It was 7:30 in the morning, and his mind, body and soul wanted nothing more than to be asleep right now.

"Priority delivery... got it. Thanks for calling... Alright." Steve hung up phone with his left hand as his right hand lazily filled in the boxes of yet another order chart. He had nearly dozed off behind the wheel that morning during his hour-long commute. Driving all the way from Hawkins to Indianapolis during the morning rush hour was difficult enough when he *wasn't* half asleep. Especially when he had nothing to look forward to besides eight hours in this stuffy office with these lifeless coworkers. Steve had had a feeling for a while that he would end up working for his father's company eventually. It didn't require a college degree, or a college application, or *any* application for that matter. It was the easiest route, which had always been his route of choice. Still, sitting at this cramped desk in this smelly office building, he was seriously questioning if this was a route he was willing to stay on. Sure, it offered insurance, benefits, and all that "adult stuff". But was it really worth it?

"STEVE! Get that damn phone call!"

"Wha...?" Steve snapped out of his trance to his Dad screaming at him. Weird, usually the ringing telephone would jolt him back to reality. Not this time, apparently. He must've been even more tired than usual.

"Sorry, Dad," Steve groaned.

"Dad?" The man looked down at him. "I'm not your *Dad* here, boy. You got that? This is a business. I'm paying you *just* like I'm paying

these fine people over here." He gestured toward the other workers, sitting at their desks. Some of them were on their telephones, while others seemed to mindlessly jot numbers on order charts. Not one of them noticed the interaction between Steve and his father.

"Sorry... sorry sir," Steve corrected himself quietly, unable to look his father in the eyes.

"You're sorry, huh?" His dad said, shaking his head. "Maybe if you were actually sorry, you would pick up the *damn phone!*"

Steve turned back around, realizing that the phone was still ringing. Sighing, he lifted the handset and held it up to his ear, his dad still staring at him in the corner of his eye. There was *no way* he was going to spend his life working here. Not even close.

"Dustin, stop that! That's disgusting!" Max turned her face away, looking like she was ready to vomit.

"What do you mean? Chocolate pudding goes with *anything*, right Lucas?" Said Dustin as he dipped another chicken nugget into the Snack Pack canister.

Lucas looked at him skeptically. "Wellllll... It has its limits." He, too, looked rather disgusted as he watched his friend dip his meal into the pudding like it was barbecue sauce.

"That's where you're wrong, Lucas," Dustin said through a mouthful of his cafeteria concoction. "You've just gotta give it a chance. Don't knock it till you try it!"

"I don't think it looks that bad," Will said. "I'd give it a try."

"Thank you!" exclaimed Dustin. "See? Will knows what's good. You guys just have poor taste."

Max rolled her eyes.

"Man, you guys would eat *shit* if I told you it was chocolate pudding!" Lucas said, shaking his head. "What about you, Mike? Are you with these bums, or do you actually eat foods that are *meant* to be eaten

together?"

"Huh?" Mike turned to him, his dreamy grin turning to a confused expression. "Wait, sorry. What were you guys talk- oh GOD, Dustin, why are you *eating that*?"

"Oh *come on*!" Dustin groaned. "You guys are no fun."

"Mike, you didn't even know what we were talking about. That's like the third time today." What's going on, man?" Lucas said.

"Maybe the Mind Flayer got him," Said Dustin, his eyes widening.

"That's not funny!" Said Mike. He glanced at Will, who shrugged it off, smiling.

"I don't think he would seem so happy if it was the Mind Flayer," said Max. She turned to Mike. "You've been smiling a lot, did something cool happen?"

"It's uh, it's nothing," Said Mike. "I'm just really tired today."

"Riiiiight," Dustin smirked. "Bet you he's hiding Eleven in his basement again. Hey Mike, can we play Dungeons and Dragons at your place tonight?" He raised his eyebrows, trying to hold back his laughter.

"Real funny, Dustin," said Mike, sarcastically. Despite their obnoxious teasing, he desperately wanted to tell them the real reason why he was distracted; why his mind kept gravitating to blissful daydreams when he was in his classes, or in this case, the lunchroom. But he had promised El that he wouldn't tell anyone, and Mike wasn't one to break his promises. Especially those made to Eleven.

"Come on, Mike. You don't have to hide anything from us," said Lucas.

"Yeah, tell us, Frogface!"

The entire group turned their heads towards the familiar yet unwelcome voice. Troy was hovering behind Mike, with James standing by his side, holding a Coke.

"We missed you guys," James sneered.

"Yeah," said Troy. "High school's just not the same without 'em, am I right?" He reached down and ruffled Mike's hair aggressively.

"Screw off, Troy," Dustin shot back. "No one likes you."

Troy gasped, faking a shocked expression as he put his hands over his heart. "Oh! Oh, did you hear that, James? What are we gonna do? Who are we gonna hang out with?" He turned back to Dustin, his attitude suddenly turning more hostile. "You might want to shut up, unless you want to be toothless again."

James snickered as he strolled to the other side of the table where Dustin and Will were sitting.

"Look who we have here!" He said. "If it isn't zombie boy himself! Can I have your autograph?"

Will looked down at the table, trying his best to ignore the larger boy looming over him.

"Hey, faggot. I'm talking to you. You wanna look at me?"

Will continued to stare at the table. Suddenly, he felt a splash of liquid hitting the top of his head as the two bullies burst out laughing. James had tipped his coke can upside-down over Will's head, its dark contents spilling down the back of his neck.

"Go to hell, James!" Mike stood up from his seat, enraged.

"Aw, is Frogface going to save the day again? You're such a nice friend!" Troy teased. "Oh wait. That creepy girl you used to hang out with isn't here to back you up? What a shame. Did she get lost in the woods too?"

Mike glared at him, hatred burning in his eyes. It was taking all of his self-control not to attack him, right there. But Troy was larger than Mike, having grown considerably since he had last seen him, back in middle school. Mike opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He couldn't think clearly; his head was clouded with rage.

"Well? What're you gonna do, *Mike*? Hit me?" Troy smirked, stepping closer to the fuming Mike.

"I think he's gonna *piss himself*," James laughed.

"Hey, why don't you back the hell off?" Max spoke up, addressing both of the bullies.

"*Who* are you again?" Troy flared, turning towards her. "Because last I checked, girls don't hang out with these losers. Unless you're a freak, just like them and the last girl that hung out with them... if that even *was* a girl."

"Yeah?" Max snapped back. "Maybe I am. Or *maybe*, *we're* not the losers here."

"Alright," Troy shook his head, throwing his hands up mockingly. "I don't know what these queers told you, but just don't expect some psychic psycho to come to your side just because you're sitting at their lunch table."

"Actually," said Mike, his tongue finally responding to his anger. "That's where you're wrong."

"Oh yeah?" Troy responded, faking a fearful expression. "Oh, I'm so scared! When is the *freak* coming back to get me?"

"*Tomorrow*."

Shit, did I say that out loud? Panic began to set in immediately, and Mike's hands began to sweat. Mike cringed with instant regret as he realized that the word had indeed slipped from his lips. Will, Dustin, Lucas, and Max turned their hateful stares into ones of confusion as their eyes moved from Troy to Mike.

"Wait..." Dustin breathed. Suddenly, the sound of a ringing bell overcame the noisy background chatter of the cafeteria. Lunch was over. Students began to stand up from their seats and move towards the exit doors. Troy, who had been looking at Mike with an equally confused expression, shook his head, scoffing.

"Whatever, Wheeler. Keep dreaming. C'mon James, lets forget these

losers." The two bullies pushed past a frozen Mike on their way toward the doors as they joined the crowd.

Mike was shocked at himself. Just last year, he had helped to fight a horde of demodogs. But now, he had let a school bully get to him to the point of breaking his promise with El?

"Mike, are you okay?" Said Will. The five of them were still standing at their table as the cafeteria was quickly emptying around them. Suddenly, Mike took off from the rest of the group, shaking his head.

"Mike?" Lucas called.

"I'll talk to you guys later, okay?" said Mike, his voice aggravated. He stomped out of the side exit, avoiding the dwindling crowd. His four friends stood in silence for several seconds.

"So..." Dustin started.

"That... was weird," said Lucas. The four party members began walking toward the door, slowly.

"Wait, so... Eleven is coming back *tomorrow*?" Max questioned.

"I don't know," said Lucas, shrugging. "I mean, Mike *does* say that Eleven talks to him sometimes. If she was coming back tomorrow, I feel like he would be the first to know."

"Why did he act like that though?" said Will.

"Mind Flayer," Dustin said, sounding serious.

"God, Dustin! It's *not* the Mind Flayer, okay?" Lucas shook his head, fighting the urge to smack his friend.

"What's his deal, then?" Dustin responded.

"I don't know," Lucas said. "We'll just have to ask him."

"That will be three dollars and twenty-five cents," Joyce Byers gave a warm smile to the customer as she opened the cash register. Smiling

had been more difficult for her over the past year. Ever since that fateful night, when she could do nothing but watch in horror as Bob was brutally torn apart by those hideous beasts before her very eyes. Joyce could hardly believe that an entire year had gone by. It still seemed like yesterday. The flashbacks still seemed so real. Still, she held onto the words that Jim Hopper had given her while she was waiting for her son in the parking lot, during the middle school dance. *Every day it gets a little easier*. Healing was a slow process, and she knew that the sorrow would never completely go away. She just had to trust that the worst of it was truly behind her.

The sound of a ringing telephone startled Joyce from her thoughts. She quickly snatched the phone and held it up to her ear. It was a knee jerk reaction that had become somewhat of a habit.

"Melvald's General Store, this is Joyce!"

"Hey, Joyce. This is Jim. You're not too busy right now, are you?"

Joyce smiled, for real this time, as she glanced around the quiet shop. "No, we're not very busy today. How are you, Hop?" she said, her voice becoming cheery. She always enjoyed talking with Jim Hopper, and his occasional calls would always help her long shifts go by a little faster.

"Oh, you know. Just living the dream." Hopper replied.

"And how is Jane holding up?" Joyce questioned.

"Actually... See, that's what I'm calling about."

"Is something wrong?" Said Joyce, her voice suddenly filled with sympathy. "Is she sick again? I can bring her some books. O-or make some chicken noodle soup or-"

"No, no. It's nothing like that at all, actually." Hopper jumped in, cutting off her flurry of offers. *She's so nice*, he thought. *She's offering to help and I haven't even told her anything yet.*

"Actually..." Hopper began. "I was, uh... I was thinking about letting her come out and visit her friends tomorrow."

Joyce gasped with excitement. "Oh, Hop! That's fantastic! I knew she was ready."

"Yeah, well... That was never really the issue," said Hopper. "I've been debating it for a while now. But I think it should be safe."

"Oh, I'm sure it is, Hop," Joyce said confidently. "I'm so excited for you two! She's such a sweet, special girl." Joyce's eyes were becoming wet. Even though she didn't get to see Jane as much as she would have liked, the two of them had developed a special bond after everything that she had done to help her son. Since hearing about Jane's past, and what she had to go through, Joyce felt especially protective and caring of the young girl.

"Yeah. She sure is," said Hopper, a proud smile forming on his lips.

"You know what?" Joyce began. "Tomorrow, my shift starts early in the morning. I'll be off of work by three o'clock. Jane could come over to my place. I'd be happy to have her!"

"Could you?" Hopper sounded relieved. That had been the one thing he hadn't planned yet; which friend's house El would visit. He knew that the Wheelers would be open to it, but he had second thoughts about letting El visit that boy's house right away. Granted, he would be there to supervise, but knowing how teenagers could be... he just didn't trust that Wheeler kid with his daughter.

"Oh, you know I would love to!" Joyce chirped. "And I'm sure that Will will be happy to see her too. Did you invite any others?"

"Well, I'll have to ask her who she wants to see. But I was thinking all of her friends. All of them who can make it, of course. I know it's kind of a short notice."

"That sounds wonderful, Hop! It's so amazing, that you're doing this for her. It really is. I know you might not feel like the best father all the time, but you've changed her life in so many ways," Joyce's voice showed signs of choking up, but she gathered herself. "If there's anything I can do for either of you, just let me know. *Anything* at all. Really," said Joyce. "I know it's been hard for her, and now that she's transitioning into the world... I *want* to be there for her, Hop. I really

do."

Hopper nodded his head, despite still being on a phone call. "Thanks, Joyce... I'm glad I have you."

"So, will I see you and Jane tomorrow, then?" Joyce said. Hopper could hear her smile through the telephone.

"You bet."

The slam of a heavy metal door rang throughout the concrete walls of an underground laboratory. Richard was used to the noise, but it still startled him on certain days. Certain days when he was a bit more nervous than usual. Carrying a black, rectangular case, Richard approached the tall, white-haired man standing at the desk near the middle of the dimly lit room.

"Richard. It's good to see you again."

"Same to you, sir."

"Do you have the vials I requested?"

"Yes, sir," Richard held up the case he was holding.

"Excellent. May I have a look?"

"Certainly, sir."

Richard lifted the metal case and placed it atop the desk. Dr. Brenner placed his hands behind his back, peering down at the shorter man's hands as they unlatched the locks on the box and lifted the lid, exposing its contents.

"As you can see," Richard began. "We have 12 five-milliliter vials, six of each type," he gestured toward the top row. "The blue capped tubes are the exact formula that I gave you a sample of last night. Extremely fast acting. You'll see the results in seconds. However, I cannot say with absolute certainty that the effect is permanent."

"Is that so?" Brenner moved his hands to the pockets of his jacket.

"Well, you see sir, my partner and I, we haven't tested it enough to know for sure. It is still a new formula, after all."

"Of course," Brenner nodded in understanding.

Richard moved his hand down to the lower row of vials. "Now the black caps; those are the slower-acting ones we were experimenting with last month. As you know, they take around two hours to take full effect. However, they double as a tranquilizer. And I can say with one-hundred percent certainty that these ones won't wear off. Ever."

"Fascinating," the old man nodded in approval as he reached down, plucking one of the tiny glass tubes from its slot in the protective grey foam. He held it in front of his face, staring at it thoughtfully.

"So, uh..." Richard began, breaking the silence. "I think we agreed on... eight thousand, yes?"

Dr. Brenner lowered the vial, slipping it into his jacket pocket.

"Of course, Richard," he smiled. "But first, there's something I'd like to show you. Come."

Brenner led the younger man to the closet door at the far end of the room. "Wouldn't you like to see the results of our test sample?" he said, as he fished a key from his pocket.

"I certainly would, sir," Richard responded as he nervously followed the old man.

Dr. Brenner turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. Inside sat a man that Richard had never seen before. He appeared to be in his forties, and had the appearance of someone who hadn't seen a shower in months. Wearing only a hospital gown, he sat comfortably on the edge of the lone bed in the center of the storage room. The man smiled at Richard, showing his few remaining teeth to be crooked and yellow. He held up his boney hand in a gentle wave.

While Richard wasn't at all surprised by what he saw, the sickly condition of the man still caused a slight disturbance in his conscience. Unlike several of the other scientists working on this

project, he hadn't worked with Dr. Brenner prior to being roped under him one year ago. He had known going in that the practices wouldn't be the most ethical, considering he was joining an underground laboratory run by a man who, as far as the rest of the world was concerned, was dead. Still, the pay was unlike anything he had ever experienced before, and, while he could never really tell with Brenner, it seemed like he had gained some trust from the older scientist.

"Richard, I'd like you to meet James."

Richard looked at the man uneasily as James continued to smile widely at him. His expression hadn't budged since he had first laid eyes on the scientist.

"James," Brenner said in a commanding voice. "Would you please lie down and go to sleep?"

Instantly, James's face returned to a blank expression as he laid on his back and closed his eyes. Within seconds, he was out cold.

"As you can see, the sample formula was quite successful," Brenner said, looking at the man on the table.

Richard nodded.

"It's truly remarkable, what we've accomplished, Richard." Brenner turned to his assistant. "However, now that we've reached this milestone, it is especially important that we continue to move forward." Brenner placed his hands into his jacket pockets. "From here on out, it is imperative that you trust me," Brenner said. "No matter what."

"Always, sir," Richard said, an uneasiness creeping into his voice.

"Fantastic" said Brenner. "You're going to be *very* important to me, Richard."

Suddenly, Richard felt two hairy arms wrap around him from behind. He panicked, trying to free himself, but the skinny limbs were surprisingly strong as they gripped his neck and shoulders with bone-crushing tightness. He could feel James's beard against the back of

his head as one of the arms pressed into his neck, choking him.

"B-Brenner," he gasped. "Brenner!"

"I'm sorry," said Brenner, though his face showed no sympathy as his cold eyes stared at the struggling man. He removed his hands from his jacket pocket, this time holding a loaded needle.

"I just need one scientist that I *know* will do exactly what I ask."